

I. OVERCOAT

Whenever we come to the country, cleaning begins. Upon leaving we leave everything in order and clean, yet when we return, we have an irresistible urge to straighten everything out even more than before.

Of course, rodents have left their droppings here and there; spiders have woven their webs; there are a few dead flies on the windowsills; the hornets' nest in the corner of the window of the attic room is already empty and eroded; the bird's nest behind the balcony railing has been abandoned; everywhere, there are the brown crumbs from the blooming of the oaks, as well as stalks, panicles and pollen of various flowers, grasses and tree blossoms; a mouse dead from starvation is found in the garbage can as, right next to the desiccated body, are the already empty pupas of flies; on the floor, there may be a forgotten Lego piece or two, just waiting for an adult to step on it with a bare foot, and then there are things, things, things – all sorts of objects that have been put aside year after year, reasoning that they 'just may come in handy' or have been taken to the country on purpose, for they 'no longer are of any use in the city but will be good enough for the country'.

So the first three days are passed not by cutting grass, sawing off dead branches, leveling the patches of soil dug up by moles or wild hogs or stacking wood but by straightening out and cleaning the house instead. Once upon a time, a forest ranger lived here. Originally, it was a squat little house with a couple of rooms built on the hump of a pre-historic dune. Only after many years, the change of ownership and death of the ranger, it has acquired additional rooms and new histories, verandas, attic constructions and city amenities. The forest-ranger, just like his father, was said to have had his eccentricities: from time to time, each of them had been occasionally beset by what in their family was called a 'teeter-totter'. On such occasions, they used to leave the house and stay in voluntary confinement in an underground bunker built for this purpose in the forest.

What the house looked like in the forest-ranger's time no one can really say anymore. One can get the basic idea from other buildings scattered throughout the village that has been all but abandoned by the natives: they have a simple, almost square layout with a kitchen and a couple of rooms. Once we may have seen the ranger's house in its original, however. It happened at the Liv festival in the local cultural center. In its lobby, there was a photo exhibition and one of the pictures seemed to feature our house. It was shorter almost by half, but the setting was exactly as it is now: the mountain-ash in front of the door, one oak by the end of the house and another one slightly further off. Two people were standing by the door to the house; a third was sitting on a stool. In old photographs, one is usually struck by the sharpness and depth of the image; sometimes, the most incredible details can be detected in them, but this particular photograph was very blurry – people's faces were so smudgy, it was impossible to determine their age or sex. Images from the past, wrapped in white, fuzzy mist, were staring back at us from the time immortalized in the picture and from the front of our own house.

The trash bags were filling rapidly and just as rapidly grew the list of things that should be bought on the next trip to town. There were things we threw away, but there were others that we turned out to have been missing all this time.

“Just don't throw away Grandpa's overcoat,” was an admonition issued during this process.

“Grandpa's overcoat should by no means end up in the trash,” it was decided.

“We should definitely keep Grandpa's overcoat.”

And Grandpa's overcoat was on its way back to the wardrobe. It only remained to check its pockets.

In one of them, there was something angular, bulky and hard.

It was a case of rough leather, wrinkled in places, which contained a small black camera. For a moment, I imagined that perhaps it had belonged to Grandpa, but that was not possible. It was a

Lumix digital camera and at the time they started making it and it could be bought Grandpa, in all likelihood, no longer took pictures or even went to the country. The battery was dead, the camera would not turn on, and the only clue to its provenance might be provided by the memory card. Yet the solution to the mystery had to wait till our return to the city and a computer.

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Upon returning to the city, we were impatient to push the memory card in the computer, pretty much sure that 'there could be nothing special there'. Probably just some pictures taken in the dark by a Summer Solstice bonfire or a seascape. It did turn out that there was nothing terribly interesting in the pictures, yet neither were they ordinary shots of scenes of nature, everyday life or festive occasions.

Photograph 1

At a first glance it seems that only a forest is pictured – and not even a forest, just shrubbery and much undergrowth. There is almost no color, the picture is almost black-and-white; it has been taken either on a day with dark clouds or at the twilight hour of an overcast day. The trees and shrubs form a black, almost opaque wall on either side, and only in the middle of the picture it thins out and lowers: there is a firebreak overgrown with lower shrubs. There are two power poles on it. The place seemed familiar, but we had to scrutinize it for quite a while before we finally figured out what and from what angle the unknown photographer had captured. Upon a closer look, there is a tiny triangle behind the tangle of branches on the left side – the gable of a roof. It is our house. It is not clear why anyone would have taken such a shot or how the photographer decided upon this particular viewpoint: an impenetrable thicket on that side alternates with persistently water-logged sloughs: there have never been any mushrooms or berries or anything else worthwhile. A little to the right from the triangle, between a power pole and the other wall of shrubbery, one can spy something that looks like a small white human figure, but it may be just some optical illusion or

technical defect. We tried to zoom in as much as possible, yet all that we could see was a mess of gray, white and black specks. When we go to the countryside again, we'll just have to try and find that vantage point. [..]

II. JOURNAL

August 20, 1917

“To hope!” Tidriķis made a toast, raising his glass of cut crystal. The first of the three bottles remaining from the prewar time was close to empty.

“To hell with it!” Alberts replied, clinking energetically with Tidriķis.

“Hope is the comfort of fools!” I joined in. The night before we drank to the memory of the ill-fated dream of Latvia's statehood and independence. And the more bubbly we drank, the greater our grim conviction became that we would turn out to be right. It's all over. Done for. We, Latvians, simply aimed too high. We are doomed. We cannot shake off either the Russians or the Germans and be free. If one set is gone, they will be replaced by others, and we will continue to have no say in our own destiny.

If at the beginning of the year revolution had still brought some hope, now it had vanished. What use are the makers of this revolution if their own nation has no faith in them? And how would the nation believe in them if they look down their noses at it? All this revolution brought was just greater calamity. The calamity brought by democracy. If there had not been this damn revolution, the Bolsheviks would not be free to stir up trouble and get our army to the point where it is now.

The army can't even defend Riga. With shame and sorrow, we have to run from our city, possibly forever. At six o'clock in the evening, the order to retreat was issued.

"Let us at least not leave the champagne for the Germans!" Alberts said. But I had to think about what we would have to leave behind, for you can't take everything with you. The Germans had started an attack on Riga and were advancing rapidly, but the army was losing all ability and will to resist. The soldiers are spoiled, emboldened by the Bolsheviks and lazy. They treat us, the officers, as the real enemy. But you can't shoot everyone just to intimidate the others. After all, they are our own boys, our own men. Yet they stare at you as if you were their farm foreman; they ignore your orders and want to fraternize with the Germans. Apparently, they even threw rocks at General Goppers when he came to try to straighten them out. How can one think of Latvia if you can't even recognize your fellow Latvians? Where has all the zeal gone that made us establish our own regiments of riflemen and issue the call: "Forward under Latvian flags for the future of Latvia!" All those Bolsheviks, congress goers, rally goers, Mensheviks, Socialists and God only knows who else. Everyone imagines himself to be the best and the wisest while all the rest are enemies, saboteurs and fools. "Hard times in the land of our fathers, it's up to the sons to help?" Hell, no. We don't deserve a state. Trophy pickers, daydreamers, windbags.

August 21.

It had rained during the night, and it was a sunny, crisp morning signaling autumn. The fresh, cool air did wonders for the fog in my brain and it had soon dissipated. Although it was still very early, there was much activity in our yard on Alexander Street. The old Neļķises from the small house at the back of the yard kept tugging at their two cows, which they apparently were going to move to a safer place. One cow seemed ready to go, but the other was resisting. Their boy Leopolds was trying to catch the chickens that had scattered all over the yard. The noise of war was not heard and it all looked like a tableau from a country fair. In some neighboring yard, a rooster crowed. In the middle of the yard by the horse-chestnut, there was a horse eating from a sack of oats. That must

have been the cart of the Šteinbergs family from the front building – I recognized their chest of drawers and some other things that were tied to the top of the load.

There was much activity on the street as well, mostly in one direction – away from Riga. There were army units intermingled with civilians; pedestrians and all kinds of drivers and riders – in carriages and carts, on horseback, on bicycles. What they all shared was the amount of property: the things to be taken along were dragged, lugged and carried, and it almost seemed that what they carried was not really their own; it could particularly be said about the soldiers. These were things edible and inedible; they were grabbed from what was 'commandeered' from the city warehouses and 'rescued' from citizens' apartments. There were reams of fabric, musical instruments, sacks of flour, furniture, and piles of suits with hams and links of sausages on top.

I was caught in this one-way current as soon as I had stepped out of the yard. By the Orthodox church on the corner of Neva Street I ran into Miss M. whom I was surprised to see striding, in a most determined fashion, in the opposite direction. We were not well acquainted, having seen each other only on a few festive occasions, yet these extreme circumstances seemed to allow the liberty to not only greet but also address her. In truth, it was she who addressed me first.

“And where are you off to?” she asked.

Confused, I did reply right away, just pulled on the strap of the sack I had over my shoulder with even more determination. The glass of a broken shop window was crunching under the soles of my boots. In the sack I had all of the belongings I had cared to take along; there was nothing of sentimental or luxurious value: just a shaving kit, a clean pair of underwear and a small, worn brochure "The Antichrist" by Nietzsche. I was in the habit of making notes on the edges of its pages, even though I always carry a small notebook with light brown cardboard covers, in which I am presently making this journal entry.

At this very moment I was already in fact a deserter, although I was walking with my former battlefield comrades in the same direction. But, as of the previous night, our intentions set us apart. The passing army units were still obeying the orders of the commanding officers – irrespective if they were still loyal to the Russian high command or had their minds turned against it by the Bolsheviks. Should the need arise, I could still say that I was about to join my unit in the Hussar Barracks by the Church of the Holy Cross -- in my pocket, I even had papers to that effect. But of course I did not need to tell any of this to Miss M.

“But of course,” seeing my confusion, she found her own answer. “You must follow orders, must you not?”

“Absolutely,” I said as resolutely as possible and asked if she was not going to leave the city herself.

“It is no longer safe here,” I tried to convince her.

“It certainly is not, now that you are abandoning us,” she chuckled. “So long!”

A moment after we said good-bye to each other, there was much noise from a German grenade that fell right there on Alexander Street, to be followed by two more. In an instant, the street was empty; at the intersection, the water main had been hit and a fountain of water shot up in the air. A building had its front wall missing, revealing a dresser, a bed, a painting on the wall (a Rozentāls, if I am not mistaken), and soon enough a crowd was beginning to gather. The brief conversation with M. kept resounding in my mind and kept bothering me until I reached my first destination. Miss M.'s political views notwithstanding, she regarded me as a traitor. Her political sympathies were unknown to me at the time, yet her mood was not hard to guess.

Only later, many years since, I found out that first she had been an active Social Democrat, then, after the founding of the Latvian state, she had been arrested for anti-government activities; as the

18 by Pauls Bankovskis
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Soviet regime was set up in 1940, she had been an active collaborator, only to disappear in Siberia a few years later.

Traitor. In contrast to Tidriķis who had urged us to drink for hope and to the ever skeptical Alberts, I had decided to stop my war this very morning and, from now on, try to save my own skin. No political or moral ideals, just existence, pure and simple. For was it not the main lesson to be learned from this terrible war – the lesson taught to us both on the Island of Death and last winter in Tīreļpurvs Bog? Even as you face death in the name of a common goal, you are alone. Alone with your hands turned to icy stone, alone with your stiffened arms stretched out to heavens and your face a mess of blood, snow and ice. You are alone, entangled in barbed wire and alone with your stick drawn on the edge of the German trench.

On that morning, I had no idea that very soon my path will intersect with those of Tidriķis and Alberts and that then we, as they say, will be three people completely different from our former selves.